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Let's take Affirmative Action

an appeal to all Canadians by
the Honourable Bryce Mackasey,
Minister of Labour, at the annual
Conference of Canadian Administrators
of Human Rights Legislation.



FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES BRANCH
CANADA DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR

[General publications]



... an idea that, if extended to leaders from all levels of society, could be of the greatest significance to the future development of equal opportunity and sound human relations in Canada.

If leaders, at the federal level, the provincial level, the municipal level — leaders of management organizations and unions, both national and local — leaders of community organizations, of all kinds, from presidents of

service clubs to chairmen of school boards — if all leadership people in Canada were to start speaking out, saying what needs to be said, instead of leaving it all to the minority groups and a few dedicated human rights administrators, the result could mean a tremendous new surge of positive action.

This then is my appeal —

If we really believe in equal opportunity in employment for all Canadians regardless of race, colour, religion or national origin, then let us say so in terms that have practical and realistic application — following the reasoning of those who are actively confronting the problem daily and obviously know what they are talking about.

Now what have they been saying?

It is clear that their major concern is with the promotion of affirmative action by all in a position to open up the employment horizon for minorities seriously disadvantaged by social attitude based, now or in the past, on colour and race.

They recognize that living for generations with rejection — living at the subsistence level in conditions of permanent poverty or out of sight on reservations — has such a crushing effect that only the exceptional few have the natural courage and determination to seek out and compete for training and employment opportunities without special encouragement and assistance.

All provincial governments and the federal government have laws prohibiting discrimination. These laws have served a vital function, and it is extremely important that

they be enforced with both vigour and wisdom. But anti-discrimination laws are not enough, if only because members of seriously disadvantaged groups may be unwilling or spiritually unable to invoke them. I seriously believe that some people have been the victims of discrimination for so long that they have become used to injustice, perhaps even comfortable with it.

Vigorous enforcement of the law can have a very beneficial effect, far beyond helping individual complainants. Investigations oblige employers, supervisors and personnel people to make an effort to clean out dark corners of prejudice and discriminatory practice.

However, case investigation work alone will not solve the problems of those people who for generations have been seriously disadvantaged. They'll never know full equality of opportunity without special *affirmative action* by employers, unions, governments at all levels, and every Canadian with an ounce of generosity in him who wants to do something.

And what do human rights officers mean by affirmative action?

They mean any action aimed at breaking historic patterns of rejection in employment, training and career development, based on race, colour, religion or national origin, whether or not these patterns result from cold-blooded, calculated policy or merely from thoughtlessness and apathy.

They have found that employers can be blissfully unaware of the existence of discrimination in their organizations. Despite all the good will in the world, they can be oblivious to the sensitivities and the human needs of members of

the historically disadvantaged minorities. Very few have any clear-cut policy to counter discriminatory attitudes and practices and fewer still have one that is fully understood by their supervisors and employees.

Promotion of affirmative action makes a lot of sense. Most people can honestly maintain they don't discriminate, simply because most people don't get the opportunity to discriminate. However, in the case of affirmative action no one can hide. This is particularly true of employers, employment supervisors, trade union executive officers and service club executives and a great variety of decision-making people. To them, human rights agencies are suggesting that it is not enough to prevent or avoid obvious overt acts of discrimination.

The best way to eliminate the possibility of supervisors expressing personal prejudice when hiring is to introduce a positive policy — a policy designed to ensure that members of disadvantaged minorities are aware of employment opportunities other than those associated with traditionally accepted occupations, to ensure that they are aware of these opportunities and encouraged to make use of them.

Employers and unions must convince them that the jobs are there for them, that they can get the training they need and, most important, that once at work they will not suffer harassment or discrimination, and that they will have the same opportunities for advancement as other workers.

This is only simple justice. If it has been achieved only rarely in Canada up to now, it must be because few of us have realized that what we have done to our minorities over generations cannot be undone without special understanding and special effort.

Do we understand the social and psychological gap that faces an Indian youth moving from an isolated area to a complex and sophisticated urban centre? Do we understand that it can frighten young people away from training and jobs?

And the business that operates in an area where there are many Indians or Negroes, without a single Indian or Negro on its payroll; or the trade union that has taken no special steps to bring members of disadvantaged minorities into membership — can these organizations any longer get away with the contention that they are meeting their social responsibilities?

What have they ever done to make it clear to the minority community that they want them to apply? Have they ever spoken to the minority organizations? Have they ever co-operated with the schools their children attend, to encourage them to finish their schooling in the knowledge that training and jobs and places in the union movement will reward their efforts.

Discernible patterns of discrimination on racial grounds exist in only a few Canadian communities. Where it exists, discrimination in Canada is generally subtle, generally practised with more politeness than in most other parts of the world. For the most part, it appears to result more from public apathy and unawareness of the problems of minority groups than from rigid racism or bigotry.

These features of our situation do not remove the problem, however. They do not mean that rejection and exclusion have been any less damaging, or are any less irritating and frustrating, to minority groups. In fact, their rising protests and their growing militancy spring more from rage at the apathy and indifference of society in general than from any single condition of studied discrimination.

Minority-group leaders and human rights administrators tell us we must understand the growing impatience of those disadvantaged by race and colour. The rising expectations of socially disadvantaged people on this continent and abroad have had, are having and will continue to have a profound effect on the attitudes of our own disadvantaged people — not only those who have been here for generations, but those who have recently arrived, and those who will be coming here in the next few years.

“Uncle Tomism,” a term imported from the United States, is now in daily use by younger Canadian Negroes, and young Canadian Indians have adapted this term to “Uncle Tomahawkism.” We must try to understand the serious implications of the application of these terms by *minority groups to their own members* whom they suspect of still accommodating white supremacy thinking. We must understand the problems of those who lead the minority groups.

Canadian leaders and decision-makers must realize that, if they don't listen to the moderate but militant leaders of today and start doing something meaningful to support their credibility, they'll be faced by radicals who'll have no hesitation about going to the streets, using imported technique and rhetoric.

We have been warned by priests, ministers, university professors and others who live close to the minorities that we haven't much time, and that if we fail, minority groups are going to import perspectives and solutions from outside the country.

I associate myself with the moderate but militant minority group leadership in appealing for positive and immediate

action by employers, unions, and governments at all levels to open doors which have been too long shut against people on the basis of race and colour.

I associate myself with the impatient youth who say, "we're not going to be put off with promises as our fathers were — we want jobs and training now."

I have requested a complete review of our legislation, and recommendations are now being prepared for its overhaul. I want to make it as effective and broad as necessary to firmly underpin our program of human rights in employment.

It is obvious that no jurisdiction can work alone in the field of human rights in Canada. What is needed is a co-ordinated drive, kept flexible enough to accommodate the priorities and needs of different jurisdictions, but strong and pointed enough in terms of basic purpose to confront complacency, inertia and prejudice at any level of Canadian society. I am pleased that our Fair Employment Practices Branch is in close contact with provincial agencies and co-operating in many community-oriented developments.

I am satisfied that you have the support of the great majority of the Canadian people. I am satisfied that, in 1969, there is a national consensus that discrimination based on race, colour, religion or national origin is simply unacceptable.

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